

WHAT IS A “FIRST TIMER”?

By Brad Madsen, June 3, 2004



I saw this phrase on last year’s conference registration materials for Nashville but didn’t think too much about it until I arrived at the conference. During check-in on Thursday, I received my conference nametag with a green ribbon attached to the bottom and in gold writing across the ribbon was “First Timer”. I thought to myself why in the heck is this “First Timer” thing so important...here is why!

I was really nervous and apprehensive weeks leading up to the conference and then the day I arrived I was a basket case. Will I be accepted? Will I fit in? What will the workshops be like? Will I stutter too much or not enough? Will I feel comfortable like I do during the support group meetings? Will I have to speak in front of a group? All of these things and more were racing through my mind. I gave serious thought to canceling out just so I wouldn’t have to face my stuttering.

Well things started to change for me during registration. I was welcomed by members of the NSA office who gave me all of the conference materials and explained everything I needed for survival. It is really hard to explain the “First Timer” thing but it started working as soon as I put on my conference nametag. People came up to me and asked me questions and wanted to help. The nervousness and apprehension quickly subsided and I felt like I belonged.



This was just the start of it; I met so many people that were all there for the same reasons as I was and I found that we had so many things in common. I have gone through most of my life thinking that I was alone with my stuttering but here there were hundreds of people dealing with the same things. How amazing is that! Imagine being at a place where fluent people feel out of place.

It seemed as though my “First Timer” nametag was the key to unlocking my confidence in speaking. This was my conversation starter because people would come up to me and just start talking. Everyone that has attended more than one conference knows what it is like to be a “First Timer”; I guess that is why everyone is so friendly. By the end of the conference it was really difficult to take off my name tag because I knew the “First Timer” thing for me was over but not really...because now I am able to welcome other “First Timers” and help them make their first conference a great experience!

